
SOUTH CAROLINA FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

RECOMMENDATIONS

SUBMITTED TO

HUGH E. WEATHERS

SOUTH CAROLINA COMMISSIONER OF AGRICULTURE

MARCH 12, 2008



Hugh E. Weathers, Commissioner

State of South Carolina Department of Agriculture

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Dear Reader:

Thank you for taking the time to read the 2007 Recommendations of the SC Food Policy Council. As you know, today's food system is complex and multifaceted, and the diversity of the membership of this Council is vital to the quality of the recommendations it puts together. This group meets voluntarily throughout the year to discuss problems and solutions, to share ideas and information about their work and involvement in today's food system.

As you will see, the Council has put together a number of recommendations regarding the improvement of South Carolina Food Systems. I had the opportunity to sit down with the Board members of the Council this year to talk about the recommendations and ways that The S.C. Department of Agriculture is responding, or might respond in the future. It was a great discussion and I appreciate the time and energy that the members have invested by meeting and creating this report.

Please don't hesitate to call my staff if we can ever act as a resource or provide assistance to you. I hope that you will consider participating in the future meetings of the SC Food Policy Council and working with us to implement improvements to the South Carolina Food System.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hugh E. Weathers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Hugh E. Weathers

BOARD MEMBERS

Beth Crocker, *S.C. Dept. of Agriculture*
Jack Edgerton, *Allen Bros. Milling, Co.*
Barry Forde, *S.C. Food Bank*
Susan Frost, *S.C. Dept. of Health & Environmental Control*
Laurie Funderburk, *S.C. House of Representatives*
Dr. Sonya Jones, *Univ. of South Carolina, Arnold School of Public Health*
Jenny Osterman, *Spartanburg Nutrition Council*
Keith Wiloughby, *Wil-Moore Farms*
Charles Wingard, *Walter P. Rawl & Sons, Inc.*

BACKGROUND OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

Beginning in March 2005, volunteers formed a steering committee to begin the discussion and exploration of creating a statewide food policy council. The council would serve as a forum for sharing ideas and programs and to provide an opportunity to propose solutions and initiatives to state leaders. Ultimately, the goal of the council would be to work toward the improvement and expansion of healthier and more informed food choices by South Carolinians.

Based on the information gathered by the steering committee, the general consensus of the meetings determined there was a need to form a South Carolina Food Policy Council. Therefore, the steering committee drafted bylaws and invited citizens and agency representatives to serve on a voluntary Board of Directors.

On March 17, 2006, the S.C. Food Policy Council (FPC) held its first general membership meeting and continued to meet throughout the year. General members of the Council include representatives from state government agencies, university faculty members, agricultural commodity associations, food banks, farmers, elected officials, and agribusiness representatives.

After initial introductions and sharing of ideas, the group broke out into various subcommittees so that members could participate in and share information regarding topics in which members have experience or interest.

As part of the FPC's responsibilities under its bylaws, this annual report has been prepared by the Board of Directors. The report represents the discussion, ideas and issues of concern that members of the Council shared during the meetings throughout the year. The report is intended to provide insight regarding areas within the South Carolina food production system that can be improved upon or initiated to make life better and healthier for all South Carolinians.

To obtain membership information or additional information about the FPC, please contact Beth Crocker at PO Box 11280, Columbia, SC 29211-1280 or (803) 734-2200.

AGRICULTURE PRODUCTION, FOOD INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **State-of-the-Art Farmers Market that would include a Model Entrepreneur Community Kitchen.** – The establishment of a state-of-the-art Farmers Market in the Columbia area is very important to the members of the FPC. The FPC also believes that a model entrepreneur community kitchen located at the Columbia State Farmers Market would help establish it as a state-of-the-art market.

Helping farmers find ways to add value to their raw commodities can be the key to meeting high consumer demand for “ready to eat” products. It also results in higher profits for farmers, thereby ensuring continued agricultural production in South Carolina. One example of a program that could greatly benefit small producers is the construction of Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC)-approved community kitchens.

The community kitchen concept allows producers to reserve an approved facility on a specific date and time to process his or her product. For example, a farmer growing fresh collard greens could schedule a time to use a community kitchen to wash and package his or her product. Marketing research has shown that customers would be more likely to purchase products that have been packaged locally and they would be willing to pay more for the cleaned and cut processed collards versus the raw, whole unpackaged greens.

Also, the community kitchen concept would allow consumers to use an approved facility for canning and selling homemade food products and baked goods. Currently, if a citizen wants to sell homemade food products to the public, DHEC requires that those products be prepared in an approved facility. A community kitchen would provide and encourage interested citizens to process their homemade recipes in an appropriate facility, while making their food products and baked goods available for sale to the public.

Therefore, the FPC suggests that the Department of Agriculture create a study committee to explore the feasibility of creating and maintaining a model entrepreneur community kitchen at the State Farmers Market to help small farmers add value to their products. The FPC also supports the development of other similar entrepreneur/community kitchen projects throughout the state. Producers and consumers will benefit from the establishment of community kitchens whether at the State Farmers Market or in other areas around the state.

Response: The implementation of a community kitchen that could serve a variety of needs such as the ones identified by the Council has definite value. The Department was recently approached by Harvest Hope Food Bank in Columbia <http://www.harvesthope.org> and is open to the possibility of partnering with them on our new market site to maintain and operate a community kitchen. Harvest Hope has expressed a desire to specifically have a community kitchen facility with the capabilities of flash freezing ready-to-eat meals, but I envision that this type of equipment would also be valuable to fresh fruit and vegetable growers who are interested in freezing and bagging their product to destinations beyond the typical fresh market boundaries.

To me this makes good sense, because it would be offering small farmers another tool to making their products more valuable and more marketable.

2. Hire a staff member dedicated to work directly with SC Department of Tourism and SC Department of Commerce – This position would focus on fostering partnerships and increasing everyone's understanding of agriculture's important role in South Carolina's tourism industry and economy. Specifically, the responsibilities of this person would be to develop and support the growing area of agritourism to help stabilize local farms and economies. In addition, this staff person would also provide services and information to the general public related to the importance and necessity of agriculture in this state. Scheduling educational agriculture-centered field trips and promoting the initiatives of other organizations such as Farm Bureau's Ag in the Classroom project would also be a part of this staff person's area of responsibility.

Another suggestion by the Council is the exploration and development of a partnership with the SC Department of Tourism and/or other supporters to create an Agricultural Interpretive Center at the New State Farmers Market. This center would employ educational components such as tours, videos, and interactive activities to help consumers understand the origin of their food and appreciate the proud agricultural heritage of South Carolina. Along with future plans to offer meals made with South Carolina products and/or a restaurant serving South Carolina products, the addition of an Agricultural Interpretive Center on the market could attract school tours as part of their routine trips to learn about the State of South Carolina.

Response: Because tourism and agriculture are the number one and two industries in South Carolina, it makes sense to have staff that is well-versed on these issues and able to help farmers take advantage of these potential growth opportunities. Hiring a staff person dedicated to working on agritourism issues and opportunities is highly dependent upon funding for the agency, and, at this time, would require "new" funding to make it happen. I am open to exploring options to fill this position and agree with the FPC members that this is an area that could enhance and strengthen the marketing division of SCDA.

Regarding the recommendation for an Interpretive Center at the New State Farmers Market, I think that the Board will be interested to know that the Department has started working with EdVenture Children's Museum in Columbia <http://www.edventure.org/home.asp> to collaborate on renovations to their farm and grocery store exhibits. The farm exhibit includes a cow that can be milked, eggs that can be gathered from the nest, and peaches and veggies that can be harvested. The grocery store allows children to shop and check out their groceries. The Department and EdVenture want to improve the exhibit by "connecting" the farm and grocery store exhibits and by helping students to realize that raw farm commodities are often processed and then sold at the grocery store. Currently, most children today do not have a clear understanding of the origin of their food. They often think that it comes straight from the grocery store! We want to increase the awareness of children (and adults) about the origin of their food, and we also want to help them identify and recognize food products that are often grown locally in South Carolina.

Establishing an Agricultural Interpretive Center (AIC) at the State Farmers Market would help connect the local community and visitors to the culture and history of agriculture in South Carolina. An AIC would enhance the understanding of our agricultural heritage (e.g. real things growing, pictographs of the importance of farming to our way of life, then and now, videos of real, not plastic cows, etc.) Through a focused information and communication effort, this staff person would raise awareness and oversee a specialized institution at the market for communicating the significance and meaning of the heritage of agriculture in South Carolina.

3. **Preserve farmland and our working waterfronts.** Support policies such as smart-growth and conservation easements (tax-credits/deductions) to accomplish this goal. The FPC encourages the SC Department of Agriculture to become more actively involved in increasing awareness of the importance of the South Carolina agriculture and seafood industries to state, regional and county planning committees. This could include having a designated representative in the Department who has a background or experience in planning and who can also serve as a resource to planners and county government officials needing assistance and an understanding of agriculture and its impact in their area. By exploring new partnerships and participating more actively in regional and statewide planning activities, the Department will be helping to ensure the continued growth, development and benefits of agriculture production in the most appropriate areas throughout South Carolina.

Other potential initiatives include:

- a. Creating an incentive for keeping or preserving open greenspace.
- b. Incentives for markets and grocery stores that locate in populated centers, reducing sprawl.
- c. Creating and improving preferences for school systems and local government to buy local and support their local economies with their food purchases whenever possible.
- d. Make agriculture more profitable for farmers by reversing the trend of farmers selling land to developers. Generally farmers can make more money by selling their land to developers; agriculture needs to be more profitable.

Response: There are opportunities here to work with a variety of non-traditional partners who share the same interest in preserving greenspace and the agricultural heritage of South Carolina. Some examples of current partnerships that the Department has engaged in are:

1. *Coordinating a meeting between various seafood industry officials and political leaders to address concerns related to preserving working dock space on the coast of South Carolina. The Sea Grant Consortium <http://www.scseagrant.org> has been conducting a study of the fresh seafood industry and the supporting amount of dock space needed in order to keep the fresh seafood industry alive and profitable in South Carolina.*
2. *We have recently applied for grant funding with the North Carolina Farm Transition Network and American Farmland Trust. This funding would allow the Department to partner with these respective organizations to host workshops and seminars for agricultural producers and landowners interested in learning about conservation*

programs and other land use options as they affect production land and natural resources. This information would also apply to forest landowners among others.

3. *In the past the Department has hosted an agricultural tax seminar with the S.C. Department of Revenue to review all of the various tax exemptions and special provisions related to agriculture, including sales tax exemptions, conservation easement credits, ag property tax valuation, off road diesel and many others. Based on the comments of past attendees and this current recommendation by the committee, it seems that early 2009 might be a good time to host another agricultural taxation seminar. See <http://www.sctax.org/Tax+Workshops/default.htm>*
4. **Address the aging farming population in SC** - Ways that this objective could be met include:
 - a. Recruiting new farmers into the state;
 - b. Supporting and partnering with organizations, both public and private, to host and provide technical and educational programs focused on estate planning, farmland transition, land link programs, young farmer support programs, etc., that focus on keeping current farmland as working farmland. These efforts would include the transfer of property from one generation to the next and also should include options for transferring land to non-heirs committed to operating the farm as a working farm.

Response: There seems to be some overlap between this recommendation and recommendation number three, but I agree that there needs to be an increase in the education and materials and resources available to farmers and landowners who are holding one of the most valuable keys to the future success of agriculture in South Carolina. Currently, this Department has been exploring partnerships with non-profit groups like American Farmland Trust <http://www.farmland.org>, the North Carolina Farm Transition Network <http://www.ncftn.org>, and other similar programs to host and provide educational workshops throughout South Carolina to help increase awareness and information available to farmers and landholders on their options related to the future use and transfer of their farming operations. With additional grant funding, we hope to host and present more workshops and materials such as the planning workbook available at <http://www.ncftn.org/planning>

Reaching out to the professional services communities such as attorneys and accountants in rural communities and providing educational materials and information on estate planning and land transfers, is another way to help ensure that farmers are receiving as much information as possible related to their best options when passing on the farm.

5. **Support and educate farmers on sustainable farming techniques, including animal livestock welfare issues** (i.e. no-till farming, carbon sequestration, animal welfare, best management livestock practices, etc.) Consumers are demanding more information about how their food is produced and its origin. The Department should help to provide farmers with the latest information as well as support Clemson and other organizations in providing technical and

educational seminars to help ensure their ability to produce competitive and profitable agricultural products in response to consumer demand.

The Department should also lead and support efforts providing information to the general public and consumers about facts and information related to good agricultural practices in South Carolina and across the agriculture industry. This information could be made readily available on the web site, creating a better sense of transparency for the agriculture industry on this issue as people continue to seek out information on animal welfare.

Response: One of the important roles that the Department can serve is to be a good source of information for farmers and consumers. The Department launched a new, more interactive web site in early May 2008 which provides a wealth of information regarding current events, current programs, and also information and links to developing agricultural areas such as carbon sequestration and carbon brokering, aquaculture and its sustainability in South Carolina. The Department also recognizes that the issue of animal welfare is a growing area of interest and consumers are looking for more information. Animal welfare issues are handled by a number of different agencies in South Carolina and the Department plans to provide more information to consumers through its website, which can help to cut down on the confusion when looking for accurate information related to animal welfare issues in South Carolina. The web address for the Department's new website is www.agriculture.sc.gov.

6. Increase Cooperation and Partnerships with other Organizations—A scheme of regional cooperation with a variety of institutions would increase the value of the Department of Agriculture in the eyes of producers by providing them with greater access to technical support and assistance. The FPC also encourages partnerships with private organizations that provide workshops and technical support for farmers. For example, the Department should take the lead in providing marketing seminars and workshops with restaurants and stores who want to incorporate the use of more local products in their business. But it is also just as important for the Department to collaborate and support efforts by Clemson and other land grant institutions that provide the technical assistance for growers who are trying to increase production to meet the growing demand from consumers such as local restaurants and stores. Therefore, the FPC supports and encourages the Department to build relationships with Clemson, South Carolina State University, other land grant universities in the Southeast Region and other agriculture organizations providing technical assistance, in order to maximize the number of resources and information available to South Carolina producers.

Response: The Department has made a concerted effort to work with other various agricultural institutions throughout the state to provide more information and opportunities to farmers to learn about current agricultural practices and will continue to do so. The recommendation to explore partnerships with other state agricultural organizations is also another way to continue to provide more information to our producers and to increase their marketing opportunities and expand their business networks.

During the discussion with the FPC Board members the issue of greater coordination between the regulatory divisions of SCDA, DHEC and Clemson regarding small producer exemptions and/or regulatory barriers arose. I fully support open discussion between the regulatory

branches of the agencies regarding the coordination and removal of conflicting regulatory provisions that adversely affect or interfere with small farming operations. I will ask my staff to take the lead on initiating these discussions with other agencies that have direct regulatory authority over many small farming and/or processing operations in South Carolina.

CONSUMER AWARENESS & EDUCATION, FOOD NUTRITION & HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Continue and Increase Support and Funding of “Certified South Carolina” branding and promotional program with the SC Department of Agriculture. The FPC recommends an increase in funding and staff support for the Department’s new branding program to promote the utilization and purchase of South Carolina produce.

The branding program should:

- a. Help consumers identify South Carolina products and ask for them by name.
- b. Provide a standard of quality that helps to set off South Carolina products as being fresh, top of the line produce.
- c. Increase consumer demand for South Carolina products, both locally grown and processed made with South Carolina raw farm products.

Other areas where the Department may want to focus effort to strengthen the branding program include:

1. Conducting marketing seminars for farmers and producers. These would include representatives from restaurants and stores to communicate their needs and expectations when buying directly from farmers.
2. Supporting efforts to maintain the integrity of the Certified SC campaign and protect the value of SC products such as working for the passage of House Bill 3028, the Misrepresentation of Food bill.
4. Web site – continue to improve accessibility and increasing the availability of information to consumers who want to connect with South Carolina producers and purchase Certified South Carolina products.

Response: Up until this point, we have been able to receive new funding and support for our new Certified SC branding program. Currently, the General Assembly has two versions of a proposed budget dealing with new funding for the branding program. The House version includes \$1 million dollars in new money for the program, but the Senate version does not. There will be a resolution committee to resolve the differences between the two budget versions. We should know whether or not we will receive any new funding for the branding program on or about the beginning of June.

The most recent programming efforts of the new branding program include the new Fresh on the Menu restaurant pilot program in the Charleston Area. This program is designed to provide promotional materials for local restaurants who pledge to source at least 25% of their menu items from local producers during the harvest season.

In addition, the Department has hired a new merchandising marketing specialist who is working primarily with institutional purchasers and grocery stores, with the goal of increasing their participation and support of our Certified SC branding program and sourcing more of their product from local South Carolina producers.

The Department also wants to start focusing and hosting workshops and information for producers who are trying to enter into direct marketing contracts with restaurants and school service. The Department recognizes that negotiating these contracts and providing a steady supply to direct markets can be very different than selling a raw commodity product to a wholesaler.

Another programming effort and service that the Department is offering is more Good Agriculture Practice/Good Handling Practice Audit Verifications. These audits allow producers to verify to buyers that they are following good agricultural practices related to the safe handling of food products, and having this audit certification allows them to be more profitable and desirable to food purchasers. These types of audits are especially important for those producers wishing to sell or market directly to large institutional purchasers such as schools and hospitals. We're glad to have certified auditors on our staff and intend to continue to meet the increasing demand for these audit services.

As I mentioned earlier, the Department has launched a new, more interactive Web site, which which links to the Certified SC branding program Web site. That site will also be updated in the near future. In addition, the Department is partnering with Clemson University, which has taken the lead in implementing a new MarketMaker program. The primary goal of the MarketMaker program will be to link and connect consumers and buyers looking for South Carolina producers. The program will likely benefit in-state residents looking to purchase locally, but will also provide information about South Carolina products to buyers in other states that are interested in purchasing high quality South Carolina products. When linked, these three Web sites will offer valuable information for buyers.

2. Establish "Farm to Institution" programs in SC.

Many other states have adopted farm-to-school and other similar programs such as Farm-to-Hospital, Farm-to-Prison, etc., where public and private entities are purchasing and utilizing more local produce as part of their normal operating programs. The FPC members currently recommend that the South Carolina Department of Agriculture collaborate with the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project out of Asheville, NC <http://www.asapconnections.org/index.html> The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project has recently been designated as the Regional Lead Organization for Farm-to-School initiatives and programs in the Southeast.

The FPC members recommend a number of different ways that the Department could further the development of these types of programs in South Carolina including:

- a. Food Safety - Providing leadership and training opportunities for producers so that they are adhering to the highest food safety standards and Good Agricultural

Practices (GAP), which will in turn allow producers to be competitive when applying for opportunities to supply school food programs.

- b. Increasing collaboration with private entities regarding the purchase and support of South Carolina producers and products.
- c. Revising procurement code; enable state institutions to have more power to purchase locally grown foods and products over imported products.
- d. Appointing a study committee to review other "Farm to School" programs in other states and to create the structure and oversight of similar programs here in South Carolina.
- e. Asking Senators Graham and DeMint to support Federal programs that fund "Farm to Institution" programs. This includes support of Farm Bill programs that allow for snack and school lunch programs incorporating the use of local foods.
- f. Collaborate with the S.C. Department of Education in finding ways to teach children about the importance of eating fresh foods and a healthy diet.
- g. Work with Department of Education to identify and find ways for schools to adopt policies and procedures that would more easily allow them to incorporate local foods into their food service programs.

Response: Currently there is legislation before the General Assembly that would create a Farm-to-School program in the Department to be supervised by a program coordinator. Although the Department is willing and interested in carrying out a Farm-to-School program as described in the legislation, funding to support the program has not been addressed, and this is of some concern to the Department. Having the legal authority to carry out a Farm-to-School program would be a huge step forward, but the Department has grave concerns regarding the success and overall effectiveness of the program if there is no funding to support it.

3. Educate consumers/create awareness about nutrition and access to quality healthy foods. The FPC recommends the development of a SC Food Policy Council Web site to be updated and maintained by the South Carolina Department of Agriculture. A centralized resource can create greater consumer awareness and understanding of nutrition and quality healthy food choices. Sharing information and having various program materials readily available on the website would provide a valuable resource for program directors looking for specific information when working with their target groups to gain an understanding of agriculture and nutrition. This website can also serve as a centralized area providing updates and information to various program directors when they are looking for and applying for grant and program funding, thereby reducing duplication and increasing potential partnerships for programs with shared goals.

Other approaches to increasing consumer awareness and understanding of healthy South Carolina food products:

- a. Attempt to increase state appropriations for consumer education, thereby increasing the purchase of SC Products.
- b. Assistance by individuals and supporting organizations of the Council in the promotion of the Certified SC branding symbol and increasing consumer

- awareness of the program in their normal outreach activities; teach consumers to ask for and look for Certified SC products when they are shopping and dining out.
- c. Pursue partnerships with non-traditional sources for funding of educational endeavors related to agriculture and food production, health and nutrition.

Response: One of the important roles that the Department plays is being a good source of information for farmers and consumers. Based upon previous input and suggestions, I am pleased to share that the Department has launched a new, more interactive Web site which provides a wealth of information regarding current events, current programs, and also information and links specific to the Certified SC branding program, its members and its supporters. The Web address for the Department's new website is www.agriculture.sc.gov. The Web site provides general information to consumers and producers regarding agriculture, specific information about the Department and its various marketing and regulatory programs, and there is even be a specific page for the SC Food Policy Council and the work in which it engages. Please visit our site and continue to give us feedback so that we can continue to improve and meet the needs and expectations of our constituents.

As I mentioned earlier, we are currently partnering with EdVenture on their farm and grocery store exhibits, but we have also discussed partnering in pursuit of grant applications to a variety of grant agencies that we might not traditionally have considered.

4. Increase Access to Healthy Food for All South Carolinians

Making sure that ALL South Carolinians have access to fresh fruits and vegetables is a priority issue that the FPC strongly supports.

Unfortunately, there are people in our state who face immense challenges in living month to month and knowing where their next meal might come from. In an annual U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) survey of hunger in the United States released in November 2006, South Carolina had the highest rate of households with "very low food security" of all the 50 states at 6.3%. That compares unfavorably with a national average in 2005 of 3.8%. As our community markets grow throughout the state, the FPC believes it is important that all citizens should have access to these fresh products. Many local markets are located in areas where it might otherwise be difficult to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables, such as downtown Columbia.

The FPC is aware of the SC Department of Agriculture's pilot program for community markets accepting Electronic Benefits Transfer cards (EBT). These EBT cards are part of the Federal food assistance program and allow qualified recipients to use federal funds for the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables. The cards are like a debit card and require a special card reader at the checkout line to access the funds. The long-term goal is to see this pilot program expanded so that all community markets are able to accept payment through EBT cards. Based on the initial findings of the pilot program, the FPC hopes to identify future funding to provide EBT card readers and training for market managers, so that community farmers markets in every county can provide service to everyone in the community.

The FPC also encourages the Department to work with local community markets to increase the number of locations where ALL types of vouchers are accepted, including WIC and senior vouchers, in addition to the EBT cards.

Response: Currently there are almost 70 community-based markets across the state and that number is growing! The Small Farms Program at the Department is experiencing an increase in demand for information, and the Council's recommendation to increase and continue vendor trainings to allow their participation in all voucher programs is a good one. We have had a number of student interns working with the Small Farms Program just trying to keep up with the demands for information and training, and we will continue to do so whenever possible. These internships also provide a positive opportunity for young people to learn more about local food producers, farmers markets and the importance of community development. We support and encourage the continued development of community-based farmers markets and their goals of increasing community interaction, increasing marketing opportunities for local producers and providing greater access to fresh produce to all citizens in South Carolina communities.

CLOSING REMARKS

The Council has served as a forum for its members to share their concerns as well as to share their progress on related programs and initiatives that are related to the food system here in South Carolina. The networking opportunities and the information shared at these meetings have greatly benefited many of the members of the Council and they hope that the ideas and thoughts contained in this report will also serve you in your role as Commissioner of Agriculture working towards the continued growth, promotion and protection of our agricultural industry and food supply in South Carolina.